

Against the Grain

Volume 20 | Issue 3

Article 7

June 2008

ATG Interviews Chris Beckett

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Recommended Citation

Strauch, Katina (2008) "ATG Interviews Chris Beckett," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 20: Iss. 3, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2399>

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ATG: *Chris, over your 25-year career, you have been a medical librarian, a sales rep, a product development manager, a general manager, an information consultant, at companies like Blackwell Information Services, Catchword, and Ingenta. Which was your favorite and why?*

CB: That's a great question. I like jobs where I get to make a difference, and I have been lucky enough to have had multiple opportunities to do that. In Saudi I got to rebuild a medical library pretty much from scratch, in **Blackwell** I set up their product development division, built **Blackwell's Connect**, helped build **UnCover**, plus conceptualized and built the first iteration of **Blackwell's Online Bookshop**. This was tougher then, in a time when **Amazon** was only just starting, than it might seem now that online bookshops are quite the commodity. Those early Internet days were exciting wherever you were but **CatchWord** was a great opportunity to be part of the success of an innovative company in a whole new sector. And now at **Atypon** I have the challenge of mapping new ways by which publishers can engage with their readers. One thing that I get great pleasure from is building services that truly deliver value to clients and then keep them satisfied. In that respect **Blackwell** was a wonderful place to work. **Miles Blackwell** had a commitment to customer satisfaction that was a shining example to everyone who worked there, and it is no surprise that so many of my colleagues there have gone on to build careers in important service businesses. I also got to work with some great characters.

ATG: *Why didn't you continue to be a medical librarian?*

CB: Well rather sadly the answer is money. Librarians are not well paid in general, and that is particularly true in the UK. So after two and a half years in Saudi working as a Medical Librarian I wanted a living wage, to see more libraries, and especially to engage with the US market, which at that time in the late 80's was very definitely the centre of library development. So a move to **Blackwell** and selling books to US Libraries was a great opportunity and one I have never regretted. My second visit was to **Jim Mouw** at the **University of Chicago** when he was in short trousers! Nevertheless, and I know it may sound a little clichéd, medical libraries are great and rewarding places to work, because of the satisfaction that comes from searching for and finding critical information that's going to make a real difference. Rapidly hunting through **Rob and Smith's Operative Surgery** for the appropriate procedure with a scrubbed and gowned surgeon at my shoulder, prior to his entry to surgery, sticks in the mind. I gather the patient survived — a tribute to the indexers at **Rob and Smith**!

ATG: *Since 1996, Atypon Systems, Inc. has provided software, hosting, and systems development to the information industry, allowing publishers to grow their business by providing technology and service that supports the electronic exchange of scholarly information. How has this mission changed over the past eight years? And what do you see as your "mission" at Atypon?*

CB: That mission has not fundamentally changed. Our roots are as a technology company and this remains a major strength and skill. But increasingly we are providing a raft of other consulting services that complement our technology provider services. Several of our recent sales successes have been as a direct result of our ability to apply that core technical skill to the complex business requirements of scholarly publishers, such as the **New England Journal of Medicine** (who we announced as a new client at **SSP**), the **American Chemical Society** (signed last year and due to launch in the late summer/fall), the **University of Chicago Press**, (launched end of 2007), **JS-TOR** (launched April 08), **Walter de Gruyter** (launched May 08). This client list has some of the most complex requirements in the industry. The nature of the complexity varies from client to client but all of them have specific needs that we are particularly well placed to meet. In some instances it's about our ability to recognize and manage user identity more effectively, in others it's the ability to build a single site that can deliver multiple product types and integrate with existing infrastructure. The list is fairly endless, but what underpins them all is the demand from the publisher to directly control and manage their Websites from their desktops in real time. That can include complex requirements like setting up new content bundles on the fly, changing business rules and deploying them immediately, to more simple issues like resolving access problems for their library clients.

My mission is to build greater awareness of who we are and what we do, to help develop a stronger service culture in the organization, and to make more sales. One of the disadvantages from an **Atypon** marketing perspective is that we are a fairly "behind the scenes" operator. Sure we provide the technology behind some of the biggest players in the publishing space plus important intermediary organizations such as **CrossRef**, but because we don't interact directly ourselves with librarians we paradoxically have a lower profile amongst publishers. It's a problem I need to fix.

ATG: *How many employees does Atypon have and how many offices are there?*

CB: There are sixty of us. About forty people in Santa Clara, California which is our headquarters and our primary engineering centre and where Product Development and our US based Customer service team is

based. Then we have eight in the UK just south of Oxford doing Sales & Marketing and some customer service, plus a sales office in New York, and last but not means least, a content engineering shop in Athens, with six engineers who positively enjoy XML and all its challenges.

ATG: *What about Atypon's competitors? Who are the main ones? In our consolidating world, can the market support this level of competition?*

CB: It depends upon the sector. The largest commercial and society publishers often have internal teams who build, (or manage third party software houses who build), their sites. That can be very tough competition, since outsourcing is perceived to involve a sacrifice of control as well as having staff redeployment implications. However the problem for the in-house build teams is that they don't have the depth of online publishing experience or breadth of product development input that a specialist supplier such as ourselves offers. Many who have adopted this approach eventually adopt an outsourcing route. For the rest we compete with the usual suspects; **HighWire** of course, but also **Ingenta**, **MetaPress**, **Scitation**, they all have their respective strengths and appeal to different types of publishers. Is this number sustainable? Yes as long as the companies concerned are profitable. We are, and intend to stay that way.

Related to this question is something attaining the level of an "urban myth" which is that providing content management, hosting, and distribution services is both simple and getting simpler. Nothing is further from the truth. Sure there are simple solutions out there — you can buy journal Web hosting solutions for \$500 a title per year. The reason we never see these services in our competitive landscape is that they are functionally deficient for our target market. This stuff is complicated as we and our clients are well aware.

ATG: *Chris, you are so creative and energetic and you have been involved in several interesting startups — Catchword, Blackwell Online Bookshop and SIS! How can you work inside a bureaucracy? Give us a clue.*

CB: I have never had to work in a bureaucratic organization, and **Atypon**, in particular, is the least bureaucratic place I have ever worked. There is a fine balance between putting in place the necessary processes to reliably and repeatedly deliver top class service and being a slave to internal systems. My natural tendency is to ignore the rules and just get the job done. However I also know that high productivity management teams are built they don't just happen. That was a great lesson I learned at **Blackwell Information Services**, and it has stuck with me ever since.

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Energy, creativity and commitment are key to success but so is knowing how to work as a team. The whole is more than the sum of the parts in the best management teams. Putting it together requires a process, clear goals and well developed self awareness. (It's often easy to overlook how your individual behaviour impacts on the overall performance of a team). Most of my positions have been in innovative environments and in those conditions the "fire ready aim" syndrome, rather than bureaucracy, is the greater risk.

ATG: *What would you list as the top five (or how ever many you care to list) key issues that are facing our industry over the next few years?*

CB: At the most general level I think the concept of learning, at least as it is understood by my generation, is under threat by the increasingly fragmented, un-differentiated, and de-contextualized delivery of content. Personally I don't think you can learn, or at least not in the same way as I learned, unless you can understand narrative. The impact of search engines is, I think, both to broaden access to content but also to de-contextualize it and to some extent destroy its narrative quality. This plays into the debate about quality sources of information as against "any old opinion." What you are reading now is "any old opinion" (it happens to be mine) for a relevant and qualitatively superior analysis of the possible side effects of living in the electronic age read *iD: The Quest for Identity in the 21st Century* by **Susan Greenfield**. Maintaining the distinction between quality information and noise involves interesting challenges in the area of brand management and peer review. Sorting this out is a major exercise ahead of us all.

How Open Access plays out is also an issue. I suspect I am as un-intrigued now by this debate as many others. However it still has some significant implications and certainly among our society clients the pressure from editors to embrace OA in order to gain a perceived impact factor gain is significant. This has implications on the underlying business models of our customers.

China and India — Predictable I know, but the much anticipated global shift in economic

power towards not just India and China but also to countries like Brazil will I think result in far more output and consumption of scholarly content in those countries.

That is bound to have an impact on publishers and the rest of the industry, as they seek to transition from manufacturing to knowledge based economies in their own right.

ATG: *Get out your crystal ball. What predictions would you make for the future of our industries — libraries, vending, and publishing?*

CB: Publishing has a very solid future. Content is still king especially quality content and therefore those that can routinely develop quality content will thrive. The consolidation process will continue especially amongst the publishers of subscription based products. Moving more and more content into a subscription based model will be a strong driver amongst all publishers because of the associated revenue certainty. I believe this logic drove the recent divesting of trade business by **Reed** and textbooks by **Thomson**. This development opens up the possibility for some nimble smaller publishers to make their living from developing subscription based products as fast as possible and then selling them on to the largest players where the economies of scale can be fully realized.

An important issue for publishers is how to clearly articulate their value proposition to their authors. Librarians and others often overlook the fact that the publisher's primary customer is the author. Keep the authors happy, do a good job with their content and you will retain and build the brand value of your imprints. The Web has hidden or apparently deprecated the value that publishers add to some parts of the author community, and that needs to be addressed by publishers.

The unit of production and consumption in the scholarly information economy will morph. The Article is Dead, Long Live the Article. But in its reborn state it comes with video, datasets, podcasts — a veritable charabanc of content that needs to be organized and delivered under different conditions to different users. Breaking away from the print construct is a work in progress that the most innovative publishers will lead with gusto.

Clearly libraries have multiple challenges. They need to avoid being relegated to the role of purchasing agent. They need to be in the business of literally "securing and organizing the scholarly" space, both the virtual space but also still the physical space. I think that as the distinction on the Web between worthy and worthless becomes harder to detect, the physical space of the library and its contents will be ever more important as a brand marker for quality content. That's why publishers should enable and welcome the addition of library branding on their



Websites, but also why libraries should resist chucking out all the books when moving to a digital future. Good books on the shelf are the most visible proof of libraries brand values.

ATG: *I know you are an avid race car driver (I know people who are scared to ride with you!). And your first job was as an ice cream salesman. How do car racing and ice cream collide?*

CB: I tend to avoid driving fast and eating ice cream at the same time. There's nothing worse than a sticky steering wheel.

If people are scared to ride with me in my Caterham 7 they need to cultivate a stiffer upper lip — and a more robust constitution. Actually I have sold the Caterham and I am in the market for something a little more sedate, perhaps something from the 60's, seductive, curvy, and Italian — an Alpha perhaps since I can't run to a Ferrari. All reasonable offers considered.

ATG: *Seriously, what do you like to do, read, hobbies? What will you tell us about yourself?*

CB: My reading oscillates between crime fiction and political history and current affairs. Right now I am starting *Against the Flow: Reflections of an Individualist*, by **Samuel Brittan**, I have just re-read **Peter Ackroyd's London – The Biography**, and I love huge tour de force books like **Dawkin's The Ancestors Tale** as long as they are in hard-back. I hope to pick up a couple of missing volumes of that cracking 60's classic *The Americans* by **Daniel Boorstin**, on my next visit to the US.

Between reading and working I try and get in two trips to classic car races each year. First and most importantly to the **Goodwood Revival** meeting on the Sussex Downs in the summer. It's just heaven for me if the weather is good (a standing English caveat) and then the **Grand Prix Historique de Pau** has a charm all its own.

Plus last but not least I and my wife **Liz**, who incidentally is the College Librarian at **Brasenose** in Oxford, especially love Italian food, so trips to Italy are always on the cards, — AND I am not telling you where — it's a secret that's too good to tell. But it is close to a vineyard. 🍷

